



CALIFORNIA

Black student at Oaks Christian alleges he was racially harassed for years, lawsuit says



A Black student is suing Oaks Christian School in Westlake Village, alleging racial harassment. (Myung J. Chun / Los Angeles Times)

By Ben Poston
Staff Writer

Oct. 17, 2024 7:32 PM PT

At the prestigious Oaks Christian School in Westlake Village, students allegedly downloaded a phone app that made whipping sounds and played it when a Black student walked by, according to a lawsuit filed against the school in Los Angeles County Superior Court this week.

Students at the private school held a mock slave auction among themselves in the cafeteria, openly debating how much the Black student would be worth if he were sold and asking him about his physical capabilities to estimate a price, [according to the lawsuit](#).

Some allegedly dangled fried chicken above the boy's head, saying "I know you people like this," the suit said. And several students threatened to lynch him at a specific date and time, the lawsuit alleged.

The student, who is a minor, is named as John Doe in court documents. His family alleges that the school "was negligent and careless by allowing students to harass, humiliate, and bully the plaintiff with impunity" and is seeking unspecified damages, according to the lawsuit. The family also alleges that the school violated California's [Unruh Civil Rights Act](#) by allowing discrimination to persist and failing to stop it.

Head of School Rob Black and several administrators did not respond to multiple requests to comment.

The plaintiff is currently a senior. In an interview with The Times alongside his mother and attorneys, he said he is intent on completing his education at Oaks Christian — a fourth- through 12th-grade campus known for its athletics and faith-centered education. The campus promotes its Christian mission on its website: "To dedicate ourselves to Christ ... while growing in knowledge and wisdom through God's abundant grace."

The lawsuit says that the plaintiff has been the target of racial bullying and harassment for years. In an interview, he alleged that the first incident occurred on an eighth-grade class trip at the [Slave Memorial](#) at Mount Vernon when he said a few students told him "to join them in the graves."

"I felt separated," he said. "I felt like why me? Why did they feel the need to say that? I didn't do anything to them."

To cope at school, he would wait for the hallways to clear, and he felt unsafe in common areas, often opting to eat lunch in classrooms to avoid harassment, the lawsuit said.

ADVERTISEMENT

Despite being aware of the alleged racial harassment, Oaks Christian administration failed to take adequate action to address the problems, according to the lawsuit. In one example, a school administrator pulled him aside before a U.S. history class covering slavery that day and warned him to be ready for inappropriate comments from some “jokesters” in the class and advised him to “brace for it,” according to the lawsuit.

The lawsuit does not include witnesses or documentation to corroborate the plaintiff’s claims. Attorneys said that information will emerge during the legal discovery process.

The whipping-sound phone app was well known among students and became a tool of racial torment used to humiliate and degrade Black students during the 2022-2023 school year, the lawsuit alleges.

“Since this relentless behavior went unchecked, it fostered a toxic atmosphere at Oaks Christian School, where racism became normalized, and students felt empowered to see how far they could terrorize plaintiff and other Black students,” the suit alleges.

With high school tuition costing about \$42,000 a year, the college preparatory day and boarding school attracts students from affluent families and has a long list of [celebrity](#)

[alumni](#) including the children of Joe Montana, Will Smith and Wayne Gretzky.

Oaks Christian [opened in 2000](#) with state-of-the-art facilities, including an Olympic-size swimming pool, modern football stadium and a cafe serving gourmet coffee. Over the years, it has grown to more than 1,600 students who attend the school's 18-acre campus, according to [its website](#). African American students comprised 8% of the student body in 2022, according to [data the school provided](#) to the education research site Niche.



CALIFORNIA

'They can't silence us.' Instagram accounts recount racism at L.A.'s elite private schools

Aug. 2, 2020

The lawsuit follows allegations of racism on its campus that publicly surfaced during the George Floyd protests in 2020.

That summer, a petition titled "Black Oaks Christian Alumni and Allies Against Racism" was [posted online](#) and signed by over 8,000 people. The comments section contained accounts of alleged discrimination. One person wrote: "I don't want my alma mater to scar Black and Brown people the way it scarred me."

Around the same time in 2020, the "Oaks Christian Stories" Instagram account was created and gained [dozens of posts](#) detailing allegations of racism and sexism.

Oaks Christian wasn't alone that year in facing scrutiny for its treatment of Black students and other students of color. Other prominent [private schools in the region](#) were confronted with a wave of criticism online as personal stories emerged from students and alumni who described encounters with racism and bias. Administrators at those schools took the accounts seriously, holding town halls and introducing new measures such as anti-bias training for faculty.

Oaks Christian's Head of School Rob Black pledged that year to strengthen the school's anti-harassment and anti-discrimination policies. He said he wanted to "acknowledge where we have been wrong and have failed to understand many of the issues Black students may have faced at Oaks Christian School," according to [a statement emailed](#) to parents.

"Racism is evil and has no place at Oaks Christian School. We must be more than non-racist — we must be actively anti-racist," the June 2020 email said. "A racist act against one Black student was and is a wrong against every Black student, and it cannot stand."

Based on what the student said he experienced, the pledges and anti-racist policies ring hollow to him.

For years, he said, he felt isolated, believing no one could help him, affecting his ability to focus on his studies. He has been in therapy to deal with the emotional damage, his mother said.

"He was always very outgoing and friendly, but he started to become a lot more introverted," his mother said. "He just seemed sad and wouldn't talk."

When she learned of the situation during his junior year, his mother said, she wanted to transfer him to a different school.

"I blame myself. How did I miss this? How did no one from the school tell me what he was going through? I sent him to a Christian school for a reason, you know? And I was shocked and appalled and hurt that the school hurt him," she said.

By filing the lawsuit, the student said he realizes there could be retribution.

"I'm bracing for it to happen — I'll have to go through it so nobody else will," he said. "There has to be a change."

More to Read

Oklahoma parents and teachers sue to stop top education official's classroom Bible mandate

Oct. 17, 2024



Former San José school staffer accused of selling student pornography and dirty underwear

Oct. 16, 2024



LAUSD's Black student achievement program upended, targeted by conservative Virginia group

Oct. 14, 2024



Ben Poston

Ben Poston is an investigative reporter specializing in data at the Los Angeles Times.